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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a descriptive account of how students in an advanced interpersonal communication course were instructed to reconstruct and/or morph their paper copies of original research papers into World Wide Web sites. Course goals and objectives are outlined, and course expectations are illustrated. The paper then reports on four paper assignments that were chronologically developed throughout the course in order to culminate in a final formal presentation of an online original research paper by undergraduate communication students. Finally, the utility of these assignments is addressed, and future recommendations are made. (Author/AEF)

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ED 431 396

Virtual Interpersonal Communication: Student Research Papers Morphed Into a WWW Page Format

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- Abstract
- Introduction
- Class Objectives and Goals
- Student Expectations
- Paper Assignments
- Presentation, Effectiveness and Future Suggestions
- Works Cited
- About the Author

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Abstract

In this paper we provide a descriptive account of how students in an advanced interpersonal communication course were instructed to reconstruct and/or morph their paper copy of an original research paper into a WWW site. First, course goals and objectives are outlined. Second, we illustrate course expectations. Third, we report about four paper assignments which are chronologically developed throughout the course in order to culminate in a final presentation of an online original research paper by undergraduate communication students. Finally, we address the utility of these assignments and make future recommendations.

Introduction

"Communication focuses on the messages exchanged between people and how those messages affect other aspects of their lives. In interpersonal communication, we further limit this to focus our research on how the messages people exchange affect the relationships between them" (Petronio, Alberts, Hecht, Buley 3). Most relationships are not strictly interpersonal or impersonal; they usually fall somewhere in between. Levels of intimacy, commitment, trust, honesty, disclosure, acceptance and emotional empathy vary and change within all relationships. A recent course in Fall 1997 taught by Schrader in Advanced Interpersonal Communication at Indiana University - Purdue University at Indianapolis had students examine the developmental process of interpersonal relationships by focusing on those messages which lead to growth, maintenance, and termination of social encounters and how computer mediated communication (CMC) influences these messages.

Computers have revolutionized communication. As Michel observes, "computers and modems...have opened up new opportunities for communication between people normally separated by distance and social norms" (1). New areas of communication research are frequently emerging as a result of the adoption of innovative technologies. One field of communication research that is becoming increasingly important due to technological advances is that of CMC.

Chesebro and Bonsall suggest that "any form of human-computer interaction can be seen as a form of communication, varying in degree to which the computer or the user is in control" (qt. in Gibson et. al. 7). Bordia adds that CMC includes "any means of communication which is mediated by a computer" (2). Therefore, programming computers, using educational software, and playing computer games can be part of the communication process (Gibson et al., 7). CMC can include such innovations as electronic mail (email), computer-conferencing and the Internet (Walther 52).

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There are numerous theoretical perspectives and methodological techniques available for examining interpersonal computer mediated dynamics. The Advanced Interpersonal Communication course framed its exploration by examining intercultural-interpersonal CMC. In other words, students were asked to conduct original research in the area of how a cultural difference such as gender, influences interpersonal computer mediated communication. It was assumed that students would learn more about the subject matter if they reconstructed their original research paper into a World Wide Web (WWW) site. The pedagogical assumption of praxis was the driving force behind facilitating student learning of the mechanical (e.g., learning html language) and social (e.g., rule structures) cybercultures they were studying.

In this paper we provide a descriptive account of how students in an advanced interpersonal communication course were instructed to reconstruct and/or morph their paper copy of an original research paper into a WWW site. First, course goals and objectives are outlined. Second, we illustrate course expectations. Third, we report about four paper assignments which are chronologically developed throughout the course in order to culminate in a final presentation of an online original research paper by undergraduate communication students. Finally, we address the utility of these assignments and make future recommendations.

Class Objectives & Goals

1. It is important to begin by briefly explaining that this course had several behavioral objectives which came before and went beyond just creating a WWW site. The development of the student's site was integral in learning how both content and relational segments of the same message are designed and interpreted in a computer mediated environment. In other words, students were asked to research, analyze and create text in which the decreasing amount of the delivery of social cues in mediated computer communication effected the viewer's perception of the sender(s) message. Therefore, in order to understand this assumption based on the "social presence model," "cluelessness model," "the reduced social cues model," and the "side model" (Spears & Lea 30), students were first asked to examine the following interpersonal content topics while examining the impact CMC has on most of these areas:
2. an overview of culture, cultural variability and communication,
3. situational factors and self-conceptions
4. verbal/nonverbal communication styles and context-regulations,
5. interpersonal versus intergroup relationships,
6. case study methods,
7. narrative analysis,
8. foundations for studying gender and relationships,
9. gendered personal relationships,
10. gendered romantic relationships, and
11. gendered professional relationships.
12. Lastly students were asked to fully apply their understanding of web page construction and Internet aesthetics.

    The goals for the course were to have students:
13. understand significant models and theories underpinning intercultural-interpersonal interactions,
14. recognize and comprehend several methodological approaches used in examining interpersonal relationships,
15. become familiar with using a case study approach and narrative analysis in examining intercultural interpersonal issues,
16. analyze strategic processes used to interact with others and developmental processes in forming, changing and ending relationships,
17. begin to comprehend the verbal and/or nonverbal qualities of emerging technologies (e.g., Internet tools) and its potential impact on interpersonal relations,
18. have a fundamental knowledge about how to conduct an academic pilot-study in the area of intercultural-interpersonal relations and
19. develop and apply basic skills in reconstructing a research paper into an into on-line web paper

Student Expectations

This course was taught in a lecture and discussion format with an emphasis on in-class exercises and participation. The course included outside work with a partner learning about the design, implementation and criticism of

emerging technologies and interpersonal encounters (e.g., levels of self-disclosure in on-line dating chat rooms). For many assignments, students participated in small groups or dyads. It was assumed that students needed to develop thesis ideas and begin to gather background information about their subject matter on their own before collaborating with other class members. Students were asked to first create individual writing assignments which later in the course led to a balanced synthesis of ideas between equal collaborators. This process of initial responsibility and ownership of work leading into a forged partnership appeared to work well both mechanically, in respects to shared writing, and socially, in regards to more equal decision making on the final project.

Paper Assignments

In order to effectively reconstruct an original paper copy of a research project into a world wide web site, students analyzed how CMC influences interpersonal relations. The students began early in the semester developing a thesis statement and/or research problem in a critical writing assignment which was later used by many of them in their final research project.

Paper I: Criticism of Interpersonal CMC

The first assignment was a brief 4-5 page paper which included 3-4 written academic sources. Students were asked to select academic journal articles (not on-line) to critically review (original research or criticism). It was suggested they choose interpersonal communication articles which focus on interpersonal-intercultural relationships and emerging technologies. These articles were to be message centered and focus primarily on the transactional nature of communication within the interaction and not solely on the medium/channel (e.g., the differentiation between face-to-face interpersonal relationships versus electronic mail relationships between male and female co-workers). After this assignment was completed, students were asked to begin working on a brief research proposal which asked how emerging technologies (e.g., CMC) influences intercultural-interpersonal communication.

Paper II: Research Proposal

This was an individually authored paper which examined the same research problem selected with their partners for their final research project. Each student choose a research partner and developed a research question which focused on emerging technologies and intercultural-interpersonal communication. They were then asked to develop an identical research problem statement. It was stressed, however, that this paper was an individual effort,which would result in a combined third paper (the completion of the research proposal).

This was a 10-12 page paper with a minimum of 10 cited sources; one source needed to be an interview. They were asked to begin by locating a key article about their subject matter before formulating their own research questions. Students were to examine interpersonal relationships within the contexts of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or any other category defendable as culture. They were asked to combine this issue with emerging technologies (e.g., Internet use and chat rooms, animation, graphics, real-time video, real-time audio, videoconferencing) in order to develop a research problem/question. Finally, students needed to choose a research question that could best be addressed by using a case study approach and narrative analysis as a method. This step was very important because we spent several weeks in class learning one specific set of methodological tools. It was assumed that undergraduate students with no formal methods training would have an easier time trying to accomplish such a complex research proposal if they all operated from the same set of methods taught in class. This teaching procedure seemed to operate effectively in reducing student anxiety about learning a new method in conjunction with all of their other tasks.

Students were next instructed to develop their papers by creating sections including the following information:

1. **Create an Introduction** (section)

    a. Background (a sub-section) about your topic to orient the reader
    b. Rationale (a justification sub-section) for the study's research problem in asking:
        (1). Answer why is this study needed.
        (2). Answer what is significant, timely, or essential about this topic? (End by explaining your:)
            (a). Research problem

(b). Preview of paper's main points

2. **Literature review** (section) (you may use subheaders to divide important sections).

a. Develop a review of literature in a funnel method
(1). Create the broadest relevant points of argument leading down to your research problem
(a) When appropriate conceptualize any and all terms you will later need to measure and analyze
(2). End this section by restating your research question(s) (in bold).

3. **Methods** (section)

a. Sampling - discuss the "case study" method and its' assumptions
(1). Answer why is it used in this study.
(a). Procedure - answer how exactly will you conduct your "case study"
(b). Analysis - discuss "narrative analysis" and its assumptions
(I). Answer why is it used in this study.
(II). Answer how exactly is it applied in this study.

4. **Conclusion** (section)

a. Review main points.
b. Develop a critical summation and intended/projected results when the study is completed.

5. **Bibliography** (MLA/APA) style

After the students received their individually graded and critiqued paper proposal they then began working with a partner on paper three.

Paper III: Research Paper

Students were next instructed to develop a 15-20 page paper with 20 sources. They were asked to combine the two existing papers (research proposal papers) into one introduction, literature review, and methods section following the same guidelines outlined under paper two: research proposal. Then they were to proceed in conducting research by following their methods procedure for gathering data (through case study) and analysis (narrative analysis). After they gathered and analyzed their data they were told to write it up in a results and discussion section which took the following form:

1. **Results** (section)
   a. Only include the raw data analysis (do not in this stage connect findings to previous literature).
2. **Discussion** (section)
   a. Connect analysis in the results section to a previous literature review and draw limited conclusionary statements (based on limitations of the method and analysis).
   b. Begin this section by explaining findings in direct relationship to the research question and then branch out to ancillary issues.
3. **Conclusion** (section)
   a. Develop a new conclusion section which summarize the important findings in the study.
4. **Bibliography** (combine citations used from the two research proposals)

Paper IV: Research Paper Morphed Into a WWW Site

Next students were asked to take paper three (research paper) and divide it up into logical subsections to make it more readable. They began by sketching a home page with a title, image, graphics and structure which oriented the

viewer through the on-line presentation. It was suggested that they remember to consider the interactive nature of the medium. At the beginning of the process many students began by summarizing each of their papers five major sections (e.g., introduction, literature review, methods, results and discussion). They also began to consider integrating necessary graphics, animation, photos, wallpaper, directional links and other on-line items into their work.

This on-line site included at least 10 external links, 5 internal links, and 2 originally mediated links (photos, sound clips and/or animation they created themselves). Before beginning to write html each student reviewed class documentation and notes on web page design. Throughout the semester class time was dedicated for learning effective techniques for Internet surfing, learning html code, web page design and aesthetics, powerpoint and photoshop. Each of these lessons took place in an interactive computer classroom environment.

Before students began writing code they were asked to consider the following issues:

1. whether the Unix account prepared to store a web site (in html),
2. what software selection which might assist in creating html files (e.g., Claris works, WordPerfect 8.0, Word 97, etc...)
3. how they might pull together manuals which could assist in web page design,
4. how saving all html files on an account and backing up everything on disks was essential, and
5. why it was important to the review at least 10 other web sites in order to examine their layout and structure to get ideas for web design.

Students were next asked be prepared to discuss the effectiveness and utility of these reviewed sites in class.

Although the creative process of designing a web site is not always a highly structured procedure the instructor found it useful to develop the following set of guidelines and steps in order to assist the novice student in this area:

1. **First, develop a home page** (first page seen by viewers)

- a. Consider title.
  b. Consider wallpaper and other color in foreground or background.
  c. Consider necessary table, boxes and other mechanisms for how you wish your viewer to enter your space.
  d. Consider the use of frames
  e. Consider the use of directional arrows (e.g., home, back, forward) and lines, button and other necessary graphics.
  f. Consider the footer information
  g. Consider the use of an attention getting graphic, animation or photo
    (1). If you choose to use photos will you need to first bring the photo into a program like photo shop
    (2). If you digitize sound and/or film what media program will you use? (consider the time it takes to load images for individual images)
      (a). Consider how different browsers configure and support sound and animation differently.
  h. Consider throughout the use of your site a familiar set of colors and symbols which assist the viewer in understanding consistent changes from one section and/or file to another.

2. **Secondly, throughout the design of your site continue to consider:**

- a. Use of directional graphics.
  b. Footer information
  c. Incorporation of photos, sound and video
  d. Balancing color schemes

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e. Asking yourself how will use your internal links
(1). If, for example, in your paper you mention that a particular chat room was found to develop numerous effective interpersonal relationships and this is directly relevant to your online presentation then link to that exact chat room from within your paper to their site.

3. **Third, find 10 external related links (cool/hot sites) which are closely connected to your topic either through the examination of your literature review, methods** (case study or narrative analysis) or the actual issue being studied (e.g., examples of relevant chat rooms).

- a. On-line post your ten sites under the header related links (usually an icon for related links is found on a home page) and set up the following writing style for the related links file:
(1). **Site's name with direct link**
a. URL:
(2). **Author of the site** (individual or company)
a. Author:
(3). **Site's purpose and/or mission** (only 1-2 sentences)
a. Site's Purpose:

When you develop at least two originally mediated links (photos, video or sound) make sure they are directly relevant to your site (review mapping techniques if necessary). Also make sure no copyright law is being violated.

Now review that all your steps (1-3) are in synch with each other and that your viewers can easily and successfully maneuver through your site. Check that all of your internal and external links operate effectively in a browser. At this juncture they were done and the students had created a public hypertext paper which fulfilled the course requirements and served others needs in the cyberspace community. Lastly, students needed to begin structuring their presentation of their on-line paper.

Presentation, Effectiveness, and Future Suggestions

This was a 10-12 minute formal talk with 3-4 minutes allotted for questions and answers. Students needed to demonstrate their research findings and WWW application skills to their peers by developing a multi-media presentation which centered on their web pages. They were asked to prepare for this presentation by following a set of instructions.

1. **Present an On line Research Paper to the class by explaining the following**:

a. Briefly discuss the background, key sections of the literature review, research problem, and how the methods section and analysis were
applied in this research.
b. Briefly cover the results.
c. Spend most of the time on the findings from the discussion section.

(1). Explain the key parts of the study's findings and how it relates both to the population of people studied and the student audience at large.

2. **Be creative in this oral presentation**. This presentation should be extemporaneous and interactive in nature.

a. Interactively take us through the web page.
b. Blocks of information which are large need to be better assembled into charts, graphs, or outlines.

(1). This tabled information could be built into the web page or supplemented by overheads
(2). Use a Power Point or similar presentational software package to structure the presentation and connect it to the WWW site.

3. **Also use appropriate supplemental audio and or/visual aids to enhance the web page when appropriate.**

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4. **Answer questions** (3-4 minutes) from your audience in a professional and informed manner.

"The Internet--the huge (2.2 million computers), global (135 countries), rapidly growing (10-15% a month) network... has captured the American imagination... People are increasingly building cyberspatial 'warehouses' of data, knowledge, information and misinformation in digital form...People are adding to cyberspace- creating it, defining it, expanding -- at a rate that is already explosive and getting faster..." (Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth, & Toffler 267).

In order for students first journeying out into cyberspace to understand its complexity in sharing meaning, it is critical to emerse them into the digital formatting of binary codes in html language which then leads to a greater understanding of the vivid presentation of images, pictures, sounds and text that make up a cybercommunity. The use of these sets of research papers morphing into a WWW site affords students the opportunity to apply theoretical mediated intercultural interpersonal communication concepts into a individually meaningful skill based experience. Students found the task at first daunting, overwhelming and some were even skeptical of their own abilities. However, as each week progressed confidence increased, skills were developed and due to a layering approach toward the final presentation the students felt a unique sense of personal accomplishment. These students not only learned about existing data, knowledge, information and misinformation in cyberspace, but they also assisted in contributing to the very cyberculture they observed and studied.

We would unquestionably recommend the overall process of this learning experience for anyone interested in the application of one form of CMC to interpersonal dynamics. However, a few future recommendations might make future journeys along this path a little smoother than was experienced by this instructor. First, we suggest building in as much time as the course will allow for class time instruction regarding web page design. In developing these lesson plans, consider outcome based assessment plans which have students working each session toward a very targeted end product (e.g., a basic home page). This formal structure assists students in interactively learning the material while also feeling an immediate sense of accomplishment. Second, continuously develop handouts or other lesson plan techniques which stress the integration of course content to the design and implementation of the WWW site. Students at this level require consistent feedback and assurance that they are effectively integrating their research work into an interactive online format. Also, try to provide previous examples when possible of other sites similar to the project you are requesting. Lastly, it is critical in such a limited amount of time during a normal 15-16 week semester to take certain short cuts when teaching web page design. Teaching how to cut and paste html code from other sites is a crucial skill. Also in learning how to use powerpoint, students are able to see a series of wizards or template procedures for how to create interactive presentations. This lesson is invaluable in trying to teach web page aesthetics. It is essential that these short cuts be taught in a supportive environment which explains that understanding the binary coding system behind writing html is necessary in order fix any possible problems generated by using temperamental software system.

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